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African Americans, Europe, and the Quest for Cultural Identity

From its consolidation as a nation in the last third of the 18th century, through the 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States was, from a cultural standpoint, a debtor nation. We imported much more culture than we exported. To be sure, there were a few exceptions to the general trend; minstrel shows toured England almost from their beginnings in the 1840s, and Louis Moreau Gottschalk played in many parts of the world. For the most part, however, American cities thrived on the visits of European virtuosi, including luminaries such as Thalberg, Wieniawski, Vieuxtemps, von Bülow, opera singers that included Jenny Lind, Adelina Patti, Brignoli, and a host of others. Composers traveled to the New World as well. In addition to those mentioned earlier who came to the United States primarily as performers, visitors included William Vincent Wallace, Offenbach, Richard Strauss and Puccini. What is important to understand is that America's foreign musical visitors came not only to spread the glories of European art to the denizens of the American wild, but also for the money they could make on their tours. One of the most famous of the visitors was Jenny Lind, who earned 6,000 a concert in New York City in 1850.[1] But even lesser known talents were well paid, for the most part. When Max Maretzek hired the prima donna soprano Carlotta Carozzi-Zucchi to sing with his company during the 1865–1866 season, he had to pay her 2,500 a month in gold.[2] It was not until the 1890s that Americans began to export some home-grown product. Much to the dismay of high art advocates, it was ragtime – vernacular music associated with the brothel – that rather suddenly attracted both American and western European audiences. During the early 1890s, ragtime songs most certainly were heard at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, as well as in some of the earliest African-American musicals.[3] John W. Isham was one of the more successful entrepreneurs, with two shows and three companies crisscrossing the United States. Early in 1897, he decided to cash in on the celebrations honoring Queen Victoria for her 60 years as monarch. Isham closed the American road tour of one of his companies

1 Vera Brodsky Lawrence, *Strong on Music. Reverberations*, Chicago 1995, p. 74. Lawrence points out that by the time Lind broke her contract with Barnum. He had paid her $176,675 over a period of a few months.

2 See John Graziano, »An Opera for Every Taste. The New York Scene, 1862–1869«, in: *European Music and Musicians in New York City 1840–1900*, ed. by John Graziano, New York 2006, p. 253–272, here: p. 254.

3 For details on the origins and development of ragtime, see Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime. A Musical and Cultural History*, Berkeley 1980, see especially chapter 2ff. For a brief account of early African-American musical theater, see John Graziano, »Sentimental Songs, Rags, and Transformations. The Emergence of the Black Musical, 1895–1910«, in: *Musical Theatre in America*, ed. by Glenn Loney, Westport, CT 1984, p. 211–232.

and brought 40 performers to England, Scotland, Wales, and the Isle of Man.[4] The show was seen mostly in the Midlands of England, performing in working-class towns. Many of the critics commented on the new style of music that was being performed; their main comments, however, were directed at the dancing, particularly the cakewalk, which had been unknown in England up to this time. One Liverpool critic cautioned that if the dance were taken up by schoolchildren, they would be forever lost to education. Although ragtime was a novelty, the presence of an African-American company in the British isles was much discussed. The tour was so financially successful that the original 26 week contract Isham had tendered his troupe was extended to 52. Still, this traveling troupe was seen more as a lower type of entertainment, perhaps equivalent to a music hall entertainment. It never played at a legitimate West End theater, which disappointed members of the cast. Not all exports were financially successful. Bert Williams and George Walker were appearing in London at that time in vaudeville. They were not well received and returned to the States after a few weeks.[5]

Ragged piano music and songs reached the continent by 1900 in the form of sheet music. As far as I have been able to determine, ragtime was not performed in Paris until the Exposition Universelle in 1900, when John Philip Sousa's band, in its first international appearance, gave concerts there.[6] While no ragtime pieces appear on his published programs, interviews with members of the band indicate that Sousa played them, as well as cakewalks and his own marches, as encores at various points in the program on all his concerts. On this first tour, the band also was heard in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. After a command performance for Kaiser Wilhelm II, the band played in Dresden and Berlin; in Leipzig they drew a crowd estimated at 10,000. The band returned to Europe again in 1901, 1903, and 1905. On their third trip, they were heard by Debussy, who commented: »Mr. Sousa and his band have come […] to reveal to us the beauties of American music as it is performed in the best society […]. If American music is unique for its invention of the famous ›cakewalk‹, and I must admit that for the moment that seems to be its single advantage over all other kinds of music, then of that Mr. Sousa is unquestionably the king.«[7] Because it attracted extremely large audiences, Sousa's band was probably the most important disseminator of the new syncopated American music. But not the only one.

Sheet music of many of the American hit songs followed; by 1905, on his first trip to Europe, the lyricist and diplomat James Weldon Johnson, of the Cole and Johnson brothers triumvirate, commented that as he was walking down a Parisian street, he heard one of their

4 John Graziano, »Opera, the Cakewalk, and a Farce. A Black American Musical in Great Britain, 1897–1898«, paper read at the Toronto meeting of the Sonneck Society, April 1990.

5 Williams and Walker returned to England in 1903 in their production of *In Dahomey*, which did play in the West End and gave a Command Performance for the Prince of Wales. See Thomas L. Riis, ed., *The Music and Scripts of »In Dahomey«*, vol. 5: *Music of the United States*, Madison 1996, p. xlvii–xlviii; and ibid., *Just before Jazz. Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890–1915*, Washington 1989, p. 103–105.

6 Craig Parker, »Sousa's Band in Europe. The Transmission of American Culture«, paper delivered June 2004 at the Conference on American Band History, Danville, KY.

7 See the original quote in: Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, Paris 1971. The English translation is quoted in: Victor I. Seroff, *Debussy. Musician of France*, New York 1956, p. 220f.

best known songs, *Under the bamboo tree*, being played by some local musicians in a bistro.[8] And there were numerous African-American entertainers crisscrossing Europe during that first decade. For example, Belle Davis, who had been a member of the Oriental America troupe, led a variety act with several pickaninnies. They were seen in London, which she made her home base, but also traveled to the continent, playing in France and Germany. Irving Jones, a songwriter and comedian, who had likewise toured with Oriental America and had traveled to Australia and New Zealand in 1899, toured Europe with his wife and brother. Their singing, dancing, and comic routines brought a new type of entertainment to Europe – one that exported a part of American culture that was heretofore unknown.

Undoubtedly, the American presence in Europe would have continued unabated but for the First World War. After a lapse of several years, the latest new music – jazz – played by the African-American 369th United States Infantry Hell Fighters Band, conducted by James Reese Europe, was once again heard in France and Germany. After the Armistice, Europe and his band toured through a war-torn and disarmed Germany before returning to the States. His legacy, however, could be heard on the continent through his recordings for Pathé; the tune *Jazzola*, for example, undoubtedly brought a new sound experience to European audiences.

By the early 1920s, American vernacular music, including early jazz and the blues, had infiltrated Europe. Many African Americans, dissatisfied with their lives in the United States, relocated to the continent, settling primarily in Paris.[9] Of these performers, Josephine Baker is undoubtedly the most famous. Several jazz instrumentalists introduced American jazz of the 1920s to Europe. Sidney Bechet, for example, joined Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra, which toured England and France in 1919 and 1920. He was heard by Ernest Ansermet, who wrote that Bechet was »an extraordinary clarinet virtuoso who is, so it seems, the first of his race to have composed perfectly formed blues on the clarinet.«[10] Bechet was expelled from England in 1920, but returned in 1925 to appear with Claude Hopkins' band. He toured Russia and returned to Paris in 1928. After an incident that incarcerated him for eleven months, he moved to Germany where he joined Noble Sissle's band.

The lure of Europe was so strong that one black musical revue, *Chocolate Kiddies*, was created to have its premiere in Europe. It had a cast of thirty that included Adelaide Hall and Lottie Gee, plus a pit band of eleven players led by Sam Wooding. The show opened in Berlin in May 1925 and was an immediate success, running for two months at the Admiralspalast. In three acts, it wavered between a typical vaudeville show of the period and a Harlem show at one of the clubs that catered only to white audiences. The first act recreated a show at one of the clubs, with eccentric dancing and specialty acts; in the second act, Sam Wooding's band was featured. They played an eclectic group of pieces that inclu-

8 James Weldon Johnson, *The New York Age*, 6 June 1905.

9 Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Joséphine*, trans. by Mariana Fitzpatrick, New York 1977, see especially chapter 2, 3 and 4; and Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine. The Hungry Heart*, New York 1993, especially chapter 15–21.

10 English translation quoted in: Whitney Balliett, »Le Grand Bechet«, in: *American Musicians* 2, New York 1996, p. 26.

ded Rudolf Friml's *Indian Love Call* and W. C. Handy's *St. Louis Blues*. Act three began with an antebellum plantation scene, as did many of the revues on Broadway in the 1920s, and closed with a few up-to-date songs from other African-American musicals currently on view in the States. The reception accorded the show in Berlin was no fluke. It was also a financial success in Hamburg and other German cities, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. After touring for more than a year, the show finally closed in Danzig in early summer 1926. Wooding's band generally received the best reviews, though the critics were somewhat divided over the band's renditions of the music; one said it was vital, but barbaric. The band recorded 14 sides during their European tour, which is surely indicative of their success and renown with the public. After the show closed, Wooding and the band continued to tour, playing in countries that include Turkey, Egypt, Rumania, and Hungary. They returned to New York by early summer 1927, but less than a year later started on a second European tour. In 1929, the band recorded ten sides in Barcelona and seventeen additional sides in Paris, and in 1931, just before they returned to the States, another four sides were cut in Paris.[11]

I don't want to give the impression that Wooding's band was the only one playing in the Old World. Claude Hopkins, Noble Sissle, Louis Armstrong, and later Duke Ellington traveled there as well. But Wooding toured longer than any of the others and, more importantly, made a significant number of recordings for the European market that were not sold in the United States. Generally, we cannot ascribe financial motivation to a particular set of actions, but in the case of Wooding, the reason for his prolonged stays in Europe is known. Like the Europeans who visited America in the 19th century because it was financially lucrative, the same applies to Wooding in Europe. He turned down a long term Cotton Club gig at $ 1.100 per week to tour in Europe because, he says, he and the band were able to earn considerably more on tour than they would have received in Harlem.[12]

Clearly, for Europeans, the exposure to this different kind of American vernacular music posed a challenge to their individual national identities. Whereas in the 19th century, European cultivated music provided the basis for most American music, thus identifying Americans culturally as part of the European tradition, by the turn of the 20th century, the United States had become an exporting culture of a new kind of music. To say it another way, while the culture that was exported to the United States in the 19th century served to reinforce the values of the dominant culture, the music exported to Europe in the 20th century was more like a foreign invader. It came with its own aesthetic, which differed significantly from that which was part of the dominant culture. It was absorbed and internalized, and the cultural identity of Europe changed by embracing it.[13]

11 Chip Deffaa, *Voices of the Jazz Age*, Urbana 1990, p. 1–27.

12 Ibid., p. 22.

13 This change occurred quickly. In Paris, for example, the concepts of social Darwinism that were strongly promoted at the 1889 Exhibition resulted in statements extolling the primacy of western European music. But by 1900, the popular acceptance of music of non-European cultures resulted in their slow but steady absorption into the mainstream of vernacular as well as cultivated musics. For a discussion of French views on the value of non-European musics prior to 1900, see Jann Pader, »The Utility

At first, the syncopated music came in trickles; a few European composers of cultivated music, including, most famously, Debussy and Satie, were attracted to the new rhythms. By 1913, European vernacular music was beginning to take note. A rag-time instrumental, *A Merry Meeting*, by Vincenzo Billi was published that year by Carisch and Jänichen of Milan and Leipzig. Undoubtedly there are many more instrumental works written and published during this period to be catalogued and examined. Their publication suggests a public demand for this kind of music, which publishers were only too happy to provide. After the war, the trickle grew to a wide stream, then a deluge, as African-American military bands played in many European communities and recordings of early jazz and blues became available. African-American singers, dancers, and instrumentalists became part of the popular music scene, and their exotic imported music – the ›other‹ – became integrated with the native popular music. I don't think it's an accident that young composers, such as Křenek and Weill, were drawn to experiment with the new rhythms of this American music. In his 1923 opera, *Der Sprung über den Schatten*, for example, Křenek uses popular dance forms. His most famous work, *Jonny spielt auf* goes a bit further, and his *Leben des Orest* from 1928–1929 depicts two kingdoms musically – one in modern 1920s cultivated style, and the other by vernacular music.

As we begin the 21rst century, the preservation of one's cultural identity is difficult at best. The proliferation of media – in particular radio, film, recordings, and the internet – makes it virtually impossible for a nation to keep its culture isolated from outside influences. While it is possible to point to the merging of cultures, or the adoption of one culture by another during previous centuries, during the 20th century, the cross-pollination of both cultivated and vernacular musical genres has altered cultural identity to the extent that national mass culture has been globalized. The spread of early 20th century African-American vernacular music – first to Europe, then to Asia – was significant in establishing a world mass culture. It was one of the first important cultural events that changed the United States from an importer to an exporter nation. Over the past 100 years, ragtime, jazz, and the blues have become an intrinsic part of the music of many countries and have enlarged and altered their cultural identities.

of Musical Instruments in the Racial and Colonial Agendas of Late Nineteenth-Century France«, in: *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 129 (2004), p. 24–76, particularly p. 65, passim.